Communicating special education student performance

Michael C. Dicken
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COMMUNICATING SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENT PERFORMANCE

by

Michael C. Dicken

A Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Arts Degree
of
The Graduate School
at
Rowan University
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Approved by ___________________________ Professor

Date Approved ___________________________
ABSTRACT

Michael C. Dicken
Communicating Special Education Student Performance
2000
Dr. Ronald Capasso
School Business Administration

The purpose of this project is to develop effective methods and strategies of communicating special education student progress to the student’s parent and school district representatives. The research problem was posed in two questions. (1) What are the effective methods of reporting special education student progress and their parents and school district representatives? (2) Are the current methods of interpersonal communication between special education teachers and the parents of those students promoting academic and behavioral growth within the student population?

Approximately 150 subjects were involved in this project. These subjects were special education teachers, parents of special education students, and child study members from various high schools in New Jersey. The subjects were interviewed and surveyed about the research problem. A review of the material culture and case study research was also conducted.

The review of the material culture indicated that when the interpersonal communication process is effective, when the school district clearly communicates student progress through their reporting systems, and effectively uses modern technology to communicate school issues the special education student progress is more successful. The major implications of this project will effect the in-service and staff development
programs at the school. It will result in revisions to the school's current system of reporting student progress, and provide an action plan to upgrade the school's use of modern technology to communicate to the school community.
Mini Abstract

Michael C. Dicken
Communicating Special Education Student Performance
2000
Dr. Ronald Capasso
School Business Administration

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the current communication practices of the Gloucester County Special Services School District Middle School / High School relative to their efficiency in informing parents and school district representatives of pupil progress.

The findings of this study indicated that there is a perception among those involved with the school that the school does not currently do an effective job of communicating pupil performance and revisions to the school’s policies and practices of communicating need to be made.
Acknowledgements

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Focus of the Study:

One of the many problems facing school administrators and teachers is how to effectively communicate the performance and progress of the students to their parents or guardians, guidance counselor or child study team case managers, and to the student him/herself. The more traditional methods of communicating student performance have been through standardized tests and their results, report cards, interim progress reports, parent – teacher conferences, and through the interpersonal communication between all of the parties involved. It is the responsibility of the school district to continually revise these procedures. These revisions will ensure that the progress of the students is being reported accurately and fairly. The interpersonal communication process along with other methods of communication between school officials and their clients (students and parents) can effectively facilitate each student progress.

Communicating student progress becomes an even greater challenge for the special educator when the student is handicapped. Ensuring that an accurate accounting for each student’s progress is relevant to that student’s individual disability is a daunting task. This task is not usually accomplished through standardized tests or traditional
reporting methods. The interpersonal communication between special educators, the parents of special education students, special education students, and other parties, must be ongoing in order to facilitate student success.

By examining the current communication techniques of special educators and their ability to effectively report student progress and facilitate student success, the intern will develop effective communication strategies, which will improve the effectiveness of those communication processes. These strategies will include both changes to the traditional student progress reporting techniques (i.e. report cards) and the interpersonal communication processes. The intern will review the communication practices of both special education and public schools and determine the effectiveness of those practices by surveying the parents, teachers, school administrators, and the child study team representatives of special education students. The intern will also research new trends and philosophies of communicating special education student progress.

The Gloucester County Special Services School District will be the basis of this study. The school provides a host of services for special education students and adults in Gloucester County, New Jersey. This project is being designed for the Middle and High School special education students who are classified as Emotionally Disturbed, Perceptually Impaired, or Multiply Handicapped.

Purpose of the Study:

The intern wants to learn about effective methods of reporting special education student progress to their parents and school district case managers; as well as to determine if the current method of interpersonal communication between special education teachers and the parents of those students is promoting academic and
behavioral growth. Studies have shown that effective communication of student progress or lack of progress will provide teachers and parents with a greater understanding of each student’s individual needs and ensure that the goals and objectives outlined in each student’s Individual Education Plan are met.

The purpose of this project is to develop effective methods and strategies of communicating special education student progress to the student’s parent and school district representatives. The study will result in recommendations for change to the Gloucester County Special Services Middle / High School’s system of reporting student progress and in – service training for the district’s employees on interpersonal communication strategies. The intern believes that by improving the interpersonal communication between teachers and the parents of special education students and by reporting student progress clearly, the development of academic and behavioral interventions will be accurately developed and implemented which will ensure greater success of the special education student.

Definitions:

Child Study Team - A group of educators who interview, evaluate, and assess public school special needs students. Typically, this group includes the school social worker, psychologist, learning consultant, and psychiatrist. There may be other faculty members involved with the team.

Communication – An interactive process requiring at least two parties in which messages are encoded, transmitted, and decoded by any means, including sounds, symbols, and gestures.
Emotionally Disturbed (Behavior Disorder) – A disability characterized by behavior that differs markedly and chronically from current social or cultural norms and adversely affects educational performance.

Individual Education Plan (I.E.P.) – A written document required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (PL 94-142) for every child with a disability; includes statements of present performance, annual goals, short term instructional objectives, specific educational services needed, relevant dates, regular education program prescription, and evaluation procedures. Parents and educational personnel sign this document.

Interpersonal Communication – An exchange of information relating to voluntary or involuntary interactions between persons.

Intervention – Any effort made on behalf of children and adults with disabilities; may be preventative, remedial, or compensatory.

Gloucester County Special Services School District Middle / High School – A public special education school located in Gibbstown, New Jersey. The school houses approximately 65 special education Middle / High school students.

Multiply Handicapped – A child or adult who has been diagnosed as having several disabilities.

Perceptually Impaired – A term formally used to describe some conditions under the term learning disabilities; usually referred to problems with no known physical cause.

Special Education – Individually planned, systematically implemented, and carefully evaluated instruction to help learners with special needs achieve the
greatest possible personal self-sufficiency and success in present and future environments.

Standardized Tests – State and national methods of assessment performance. Examples of these exams include, but are not limited to, The eighth grade Early Warning Test, the P.S.A.T. test for Junior and Senior students, Scholastic Aptitude Tests, and the New Jersey High School Proficiency Tests.

Public Law 94 – 142 defines "handicapped children as being mentally retarded, hard of hearing, deaf, other health impaired deaf-blind, multiply handicapped, or as having specific learning disabilities.

Limitations of the Study:

This study is limited to a specific type of special student. These students are classified as per the definitions outlined under public law 94 – 142. The study will be conducted within the Gloucester County Special Services School District and specifically for the students enrolled in the Middle / High School program. Although the project is being designed for the Gloucester County Special Services Middle / High School students, the recommended strategies of communicating student progress could be employed at other special education institutions with similar populations.

Another limitation of this study is the grade expectancy of special education students that this project is focusing on. This project is designed for middle and high school students who have been classified as Emotionally Disturbed, Perceptually Impaired, or Multiply Handicapped. The intern will use case studies and previously conducted research, as well as present day surveys and interviews of individuals (Administrators, Special Education Teachers, Parents, Students) who are involved with a
similar population of special education students to evaluate the effect of the current 
communication processes of the school district and propose changes to school philosophy 
and policy.

Although the project focuses on a specific school district and type of special 
education student, the communication strategies suggested within the in-service 
program for the teachers could be applicable to all special educators. The suggested 
revisions to the school’s performance reporting will pertain to the districts Middle/High 
School population only. While these changes could also be used in similar school districts 
with like populations, many variables should be considered before implementing these 
changes. Examples of these variables would include, but should not be limited to; the 
individual school’s philosophy and the success or lack of success of the current 
communication effort of the school to improve student performance.

Setting of the Study:

The Gloucester County Special Services School District is located in the southern 
part of New Jersey. Gloucester County is a rural section of Southern New Jersey whose 
overall community growth is rapidly enlarging. The Special Services School District 
provides special education and other non-special education services to the communities 
located within Gloucester County and several other neighboring counties. Currently, 
Gloucester County consists of several large regional school districts and a few smaller 
school districts.

The Gloucester County Special Services School District provides special 
education programming to both communities located within the county as well as several 
other school districts from surrounding counties within the state. The school district
consists of an Auditory Disabilities Program, an Alternative High School, Autism and Child Development Center, a Migrant Workers Program, and a Multiple Disabilities Program. Most of these programs will be housed within a new school building, which is scheduled to open in September 2000. There are currently over 400 students enrolled in the district and there are approximately 250 employees providing service to those students.

The Gloucester County Special Services Middle / High School provides educational and therapeutic services to approximately 70 special education students, from over 24 different school districts across Gloucester County and Southern New Jersey. The students at the school are classified as Emotionally Disturbed (Behavior Disordered), Perceptually Impaired, and Multiply Handicapped. The age range of the student population is from 12 to 21 years of age and grade ranges from 6 to 12. The teacher to student ratio within the school is two teachers for every five students.

This study is being designed for use within the Gloucester County Special Services School District’s Middle / High School in Southern Gloucester County, New Jersey. The suggested policies of reporting student progress may be applicable to other special service schools whose mission and philosophies of special education are contained within this project. The proposed strategies for improving the interpersonal communication practices for special educators within the district may be applicable to other special educators.

Significance of the Study:

Special Educators must be able to effectively communicate their student’s progress to parents and regular education school representatives in a manner that will
ensure that the student’s academic and/or behavioral interventions are correctly developed and implemented. Public Law 94–142 was passed to ensure that children with handicaps would have a free, appropriate public education available to them, which would meet their unique needs. Meeting each student’s unique needs and communicating the schools efforts to meet those needs will promote greater success.

Studies have shown that an effective communication process within the school setting will foster effective interpersonal relationships. When school administers and teachers of special education students communicate their student’s progress to their parents adequately and accurately, greater student progress is more likely to occur. Basing this progress on each student’s individual and unique needs often complicates this communication process if the interpersonal contact between all of parties involved is not sufficient. It has been asserted that students who have positive communications with teachers, and exhibit greater attachment to and view school as a rewarding environment, demonstrate better academic performance, and follow the social norms of the school. (Cheney, 1992 Hawkins et al, 1992; Hawkins and Lam, 1987; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko and Fernandez, 1989).

In an article written in the Middle School Journal entitled, What Do Teachers and Parents Want in Their Communication Patterns, Dayle Ann Upham et al. reports that one of the more problematic areas in personalizing middle school relationships still exists between teachers and students with emotional or behavioral disorders. This difficulty frequently includes the parents of these youths and their ability to communicate with school personnel. In order to better service the students of the Gloucester County Special Services School District’s Middle / High School the strategies contained within the article
along with other strategies to improve the interpersonal communication process is needed. Educating the faculty on how to conduct an effective parent – teacher conference, telephone conferences, daily written progress statements (i.e. daily school – home journals) would strive to ensure greater success for all of the students.

Special Education School Districts must report the progress of their students in a fair and efficient way that is an accurate review of each students individual progress based upon his/her unique needs and disability. A system of reporting this student progress should be in accordance to the state guidelines and special education codes, easily understood by all concerned parties, and one that fairly assesses each students progress in reference to the goals and objectives outline within each students Individual Education Plan. Creating an effective method of communicating student performance and school information to the community and by using the latest technology to achieve this goal will enable the Gloucester County Special Services School District to better serve their clients.

The use of modern technology in public schools continues to grow and change with each new computer or telecommunications program. Computers, virtual libraries, telephone mail, e-mail, websites, school newspapers, closed – circuit television programming, student - parent handbooks are but a few of the technological devices available to school districts. The Journal of Educational Public Relations published an almanac that contained ways to improve communication and people involvement on all levels of a school system and in a community to benefit students. Suggestions contained within the almanac included not only the aforementioned methods of communication but stressed the components of effective school – community programs. They are the
Communication Processes, Internal Communication, Parent Involvement, and Community Participation. Effectively using today's technology to enrich these components will allow the special education community to provide greater opportunities for the students to be successful.

Organization of the Study:

Contained within chapter II will be a review of the literature. The review will consist of research studies and articles on the effectiveness of the interpersonal communication process between special educators, special education students, their parents, and regular education representatives, on the progress of special education students. The intern will also review educational journals and other pertinent material to learn about sound interpersonal communication strategies and using the technology of today to enhance the communication efforts of special education schools. The intern will consider incorporating these strategies into the Gloucester County Special Services School Districts communication policy and be part of the educational training for faculty.

Chapter III will contain the data collecting techniques used within the design of this study. The intern will use the interview and survey techniques, and conduct a review of the material to gather information concerning this topic. The intern will interview and survey special education students, parents, teachers, and regular education school administrators to assess the effectiveness of special educators within the Gloucester County Special Services School District.

The intern will use the results of a communications survey and interviews with the special education community within Gloucester County to assess the effectiveness of the current methods of communicating student progress. Once the data has been collected
the intern will review the information and develop a training program for the school district’s Middle/High faculty on effective interpersonal communication techniques.

The intern will interview technology coordinators, computer programmers, and representatives of public–relations agencies, along with other school administrators to develop a district-wide program of reporting student progress and communicating the overall school program to the community as a whole. The intern, through the use of questioning techniques, fact finding, evaluation of programming, categorizing data will design an effective training program for special educators on effective interpersonal communication strategies. The intern will also develop a communication program for the Gloucester County Special Services School District which will utilize today’s technology to effectively and efficiently communicate their student’s progress and inform the school community as a whole. This program will be presented within chapter 5 of this text.
Chapter 2
Review of the Literature

Effectively communicating special education student progress is essential to the success of the handicapped student. There have been several studies on what effect the teacher – parent communication process has had on student performance. A majority of this research has been conducted within the regular education arena. While there has been a somewhat limited amount of research conducted within the special education field in reference to this topic, the results of these studies have provided communication strategies that would be applicable for both special educators and regular educators alike.

The need to educate special educators is noted in Epstein (1993, 50) in which he reports that interdisciplinary training programs for seriously emotionally disturbed students should emphasize collaboration and cooperation across mental health disciplines. The ongoing training for faculty about effective communication processes will foster student success within the school environment. When teachers and parents are communicating effectively with each other, the student has an opportunity to be more successful both academically and behaviorally.

Dayle et. al. (1998, 48) states that one of the more problematic areas in personalizing middle school relationships still exists between teachers and students with
behavioral disorders. The difficulty frequently includes the parents of emotionally disturbed youth and their ability to communicate with school personnel. In 1994, the U.S. Department of Education began an initiative to create a national agenda to improve school and community programs for emotionally disturbed students. The agenda contained seven goals, two of which pertain to parent teacher communication. Those goals are:

1. To foster collaborations that fully include family members on the team of service providers that implements family focused services to improve educational outcomes.
2. To foster the enhancement of knowledge, understanding and sensitivity among teachers working with youth who are at risk of developing serious emotional disturbance. (U.S. Department of Education, 1994).

The institute on Emotional Disabilities at Keene State College worked with three middle schools that included emotionally disturbed students in a program called Project Destiny. A group comparison study of two New Hampshire communities resulted in several main themes of communication issues for parents and teachers being identified. These themes included (a) teachers and parents prefer face to face communication, (b) both find it nearly impossible to schedule meetings, and (c) Teachers and parents rarely discuss personal or emotional issues. In addition, Project Destiny made several recommendations to improve this communication process. Strategies to improve the teacher – parent communication process ranged from interpersonal policies of communication (using nonjudgmental language, improving listening skills, and meeting early in the school year) to the use of technology. (The use of electronic communications was also recommended).
A majority of the research reviewed for this study provided many strategies for consideration to improve the interpersonal communication processes between parents and teachers of both special and regular education students. There were also many strategies for using technology to assist in communicating certain school information and the community as a whole. The research also yielded several proposals for reporting student progress using report cards, progress reports, etc.

The interpersonal communication process between special educators and the parents of their students must be one that fosters success for the student. Gelfer (1991, 167) reports that the communication between parents and teachers is vital in directing the child’s learning and development. Suggested methods by which teachers can establish communication with parents include: Telephone conferences, printed communications, encouragement of parental visits, developmental checklists sent home, parent-teacher conferences, home visits and workshops for parents. When parents participate in their child’s learning in school, children have a greater chance for educational success.

Other interpersonal communication strategies included, but were not limited to the use of morning announcements at school, newsletters, student journals, student-led conferences, and the development of effective listening techniques. Hymes et. al. (1993,13) outlined in an article which appeared in the Journal of Educational Public Relations entitled, Ways to improve communication and people involvement on all levels of a school system and in a community to benefit students, reported that a good school-community relations program for the 1990’s has four components. They are Communication Processes, Internal Communication, Parent Involvement, and Community Participation.
In a study to determine what methods of communication are considered the most effective? Cattermole and Robinson (1985) asked parents to rank 20 methods they commonly use to communicate with schools, the authors found that two methods greatly outrank the remaining choices: direct approach by phone or in person, and parent-teacher conferences. These researchers concluded that parents prefer interactions with the school that are direct and personal. Trundle and Trundle (1990) stressed the importance of using methods of communication that provide opportunities for parents and teachers to exchange information, allowing parents to actively participate in their child’s education.

Research in reference to improving the interpersonal communication process between parents and teachers is greatly documented with suggestions and strategies to employ and ensure student success. While many of the articles reviewed made reference to regular and special education students from several age and grade levels, the strategies should be considered valid for use within the realm of this project.

The research reviewed other studies in reference to the use of modern technology to promote student growth, communicate with parents, and convey school information to the community as a whole. McGough (1990, 14) suggests that if the relationship between schools and their community is to be productive and beneficial, an open relationship with constant, two-way communications is essential. Educators at all levels must be sensitive to certain realities associated with school communications. These realities are that the student body is the largest single element of any educational network, educators transmit a variety of messages to the school’s community through their social encounters, schools are frequently the victims of stereotypic charges that are difficult to remedy, and
communicating with parents does not ensure that the school’s program is being effectively communicated to the entire community.

The use of modern technology was well documented within the educational arena. There were many examples of how to effectively use the certain types of electronic technology within the school setting to improve the school’s communication efforts back to the community. Contained within the literature were suggestions on the effective use of computer technology, telephone communication systems, and other forms of electronic media. While the amount of research was limited in reference to the effects of these communication practices on student performance, the need for schools to use technology to communicate to parents was well documented. Alberto (1995, 18) reports, as part of their needs assessment for training in Georgia, the State Comprehensive system of personal Delivery Committee surveyed parents to determine their preferred means of having educational experiences provided to them. Of the 1,047 parents of students with severe disabilities responding, 48% indicated that they would prefer videotape.

Several other examples of effectively using technology to communicate with parents included using newsletters and daily written correspondence between the school district and parents or using voice-mail, electronic-mail, and internet websites or homepages to communicate. Duran (1991, 25) interviewed school principals and stated that these educators could not say enough about the positive effects of using telephone technologies in their schools. Dr. Jerold Bauch (1991, 25) stated that when teachers provide pre-recorded daily homework messages, the rate of homework completion jumps to nearly 100 percent, and after just using voice mail, one principal sent out less than half as many failure notices.
Despite this wealth of available suggestions for educators to consider when considering the use of modern technology to communicate to their parents, research revealed that interpersonal communication remains the most common way for teachers to communicate with parents. Dr. Jerold Bauch (1991, 24) reports the most common communication technique for teachers is to send a note home.

The use of computer technology to communicate student performance and school information to the community as a whole to improve student performance has not been extensively researched. As noted previously many teachers still prefer to send notes home to parents. As modern technology continues to improve, effective school leaders will develop their school’s communication policies to best serve their communities. How to use technology to not only communicate, but also to educate was well documented within the literature. School websites, homepages, electronic bulletin boards, and electronic mail were all suggested practices that should be utilized.

Prior research and studies on improving the communication process between teachers and parents of special education students is extensive concerning certain topics, and also limited to other topics. Studies have indicated that when the teacher to parent communication process is effective the special education student is apt to be more successful within that school setting. There is an abundance of literature that offers many viable interpersonal communication strategies for educators to consider.

Studies involving the use of technology within special education schools and it’s effect on either improving student behavior or communicating with the community as a whole has been limited. Despite the lack of research in reference to this type of
communication practice, the literature provides an abundance of articles recommending certain technological advances within their school districts.
Chapter 3

Design of the Study

The working design of the research conducted for this study is considered to be of a qualitative nature. The intern will conduct purposeful sampling of the parents, students, teachers, and school administrators of special education students; as well as conduct a review of the material culture in regards to communicating the performance of special education students. This project is being developed with the understanding that when the communication process between the teachers and administrators of special education students and those student’s parents is effective, the overall behavioral and academic performance of the special education student will improve.

Purposeful sampling techniques will be conducted in order to gather the appropriate data with which to develop effective communication procedures and policies for special education students. The intern will interview and survey special education students and their parents, and the teachers and administrators of special education students. The intern will also conduct a review of the literature in regards to this topic. The literature will provide the intern with a better understanding as to the degree of success of specific communication techniques to improve the academic and behavioral performance of special education students.
The subjects selected for this study are the school officials, teachers, parents, and child study team representatives of middle and high school special education students. The students selected for this study have all been classified as Emotionally Disturbed, Perceptually Impaired, or Multiply Handicapped. Their age's range from twelve years of age to twenty-one years of age and their grade expectancy ranges from sixth to twelfth.

The site for this study is the Gloucester County Special Services School District in Gloucester County, New Jersey. The Middle School / High School program of the district is the focus of this project. The school provides educational and behavioral services to approximately 60 special education students from fourteen school districts across several counties in Southern New Jersey. The school is an out-of-district placement for students who have been classified as eligible to receive special education services by the natural school district's child study team. The Gloucester County Special Services School District is a not-for-profit, tuition-based institution which provides services to over 300 special education students from grades kindergarten through high school, and who have a wide range of disabilities.

The research contained within this study was conducted during the 1999 - 2000 school year at the Gloucester County Special Services School District’s Middle School / High School. Interviews and surveys were conducted with the school’s current staff and school community. While the data collected for this study was completed within one calendar year, the subjects interviewed and surveyed for the purpose of this project have been involved with the teaching and parenting of special education students for more than one year. The collection of information within the material culture about communicating
special education student performance will be limited to studies and articles, which were conducted within the last 30 years.

After compiling, reviewing, and analyzing the aforementioned data; the intern will assess the effectiveness of the Gloucester County Special Services Middle School / High School’s communication practices in its attempt to improve the overall academic and performance of the school’s students. The intern will use this assessment along with the review of the material culture to propose change in current school policies and procedures and to develop an in-service program on effective communication practices for the school community.

One of the data collection instruments used for this study is the surveying and interviewing of teachers, school administrators, child study team representatives, and parents of special education middle school / high school students. Data will also be collected through a review of the material culture in reference to how effective certain communication practices are in their attempt to improve the performance of special education students. Specifically, middle / high school aged emotionally disturbed adolescents.

The type of survey used to collect data for this project is of a cross-sectional design. Data will be collected from the parents, teachers, and school administrators of middle school / high school special education students. This data will be used to assess the productiveness of the Gloucester County Special Services School District’s Middle School / High School’s communication practices to improve the academic and behavioral performance of their students. Parallel samples will be compared that will include school administrators, teachers, and parents of special education students to identify their
perceptions of the effectiveness of the school’s communication policies to improve student progress.

Interviews will also be conducted in a cross sectional design. The intern will interview school administrators, teachers, and parents of special education students. These interviews will be conducted both informally and formally. Teachers will communicate the effectiveness of the current communication practices to improve student performance to the intern during the teachers scheduled individual meetings with the intern. Through the ongoing weekly communication between each special education teacher and the intern, the intern will be able to assess the effectiveness of current school practices.

Formal and informal meetings between school administrators and the parents of the Gloucester County Special Services School District Middle School / High School students occur on a daily basis. During these meetings, the intern will assess the effectiveness of the school’s communication practices to improve the student’s overall performance and assess the parent’s perception of the school’s communication policies.

The intern will also collect information by conducting a review of the literature about the most effective communication practices of special educators. The effectiveness of these practices to improve the academic and behavioral performance of middle / high school special education students, the results of previously conducted studies on this topic, and suggestions for instrumentation and research design will be developed and implemented.

Purposeful sampling procedures will be employed to gather data for this project. The population being considered for sampling is those who are involved with special
education. The characteristics of the population considered within this study are limited to the teachers, school administrators, and parents of special education students. Specifically, middle and high school special education students who are classified as emotionally disturbed or multiply handicapped.

Gloucester County Special Services Middle School / High School faculty members, students, and their parents will serve as subjects for this study. The school enrollment is approximately 60 to 70 special education students. Parents, teachers, and school administrators will be selected for this study based on the following criteria: (a) they work with or are the parent of a child who attends the Gloucester County Special Services School District, (b) the child under consideration is classified as emotionally disturbed or multiply handicapped. All of the teachers and students at the G.C.S.S.S.D. Middle School / High School will meet this criteria. Across the sample the age range of the students is from 11 to 21 years of age, the average age of the teaching staff is 32, and the range of teacher experience with special education students was from 1 year of experience to 25 years.

A community survey will be distributed within the school district community to gather data about the perceptions of the effectiveness of the communication practices of the G.C.S.S.S.D. Middle School / High School. This survey will be given to the teachers, school administrators, and parents during the second marking period. The results of these surveys along with several other data collection methods will result in changes to the school’s communication practices.

The intern will conduct on-going interview surveys about the communication efforts of the school. The format of these interviews will be both formal and informal.
In formal surveys will occur throughout each school day as the intern interacts with the participants outlined in this project. The intern will record these interactions as they occur. Formal interviews will occur during the scheduled weekly meetings between the intern and other school personnel, and during individual parent and parent/district conferences as they occur during the first two marking periods of the 1999–2000 school year.

Upon collection of the communication survey from the project participants, the intern will conduct a parallel sample comparison to identify the perception of the effectiveness of the school’s current communication practice. Comparisons will be made between the responses of the teachers, parents, and school administrators who were questioned. An ordinal difference scale will be developed and examined in preparation for policy revisions at the school.

These surveys will be constructed in a way that will provide an attitude inventory, which is designed to rate the participant’s feelings toward the communication policies of the school. These results will be scored using the Likert Scale of data measurement.

The in–formal and formal interviewing of the participants of this study will provide the intern with an observation system with which to record the responses to preselected questions. The intern will develop a series of questions that will be asked of the teachers, parents, and school administrators during these interviews that will provide the intern with a general perception of the effectiveness of the school’s communication practices to improve student performance.

The intern will identify and review educational literature of the last 30 years in reference to the communication of special education student performance. This
information will provide the intern background concerning the efforts of researchers thus far and suggestions for the modifications to current research procedures about this project. This portion of the project is to occur before the surveying of the project’s participants and will be an intricate part of the development of the survey itself.

The data collected for this project will provide school administrators with a greater understanding of the perceptions of the teachers, students, and parents of the school in terms of the effectiveness of the schools ability to communicate the performance of their students. It will also provide the intern with a method of tracking the efforts of the communication process to improve the behavioral and academic performance of the student body.
Chapter 4
Presentation of the Research Findings

Special educators face the daunting task of how to effectively communicate the lack of progress of their students. Research has shown that when the communication policies of special education school districts have been well developed and implemented by the school's staff, the special education student will be more successful. Much of the research has centered on several essential elements of the communication schema. These elements included, but were not limited to; the importance of effective interpersonal communication practices, the use of modern technology to communicate, and the development of a comprehensive system of reporting student progress relative to that student's disability. (i.e. report cards, point sheets, etc.)

The intern conducted qualitative research on the communication practices of special educators. Through a working design, the intern attempted to answer two very important questions. First, what is the perception of the effectiveness of the communication practices at the Gloucester County Special Services School District Middle School / High School when communicating the progress of their students to parents and child study team representatives? Secondly, what studies have been done which will provide the district with information that would result in changes to the current school communication policies at the school?

Several data collection approaches were employed to gather information, which will be used to develop more effective ways to communicate the progress of the students.
within the Gloucester County Special Services School District. The intern conducted both informal and formal interviews with teachers, parents, school district administrators, and child study team representatives. A review of the literature was also conducted to provide the intern with information about effective communication practices. In addition, the intern surveyed the Middle School / High School community to develop an understanding of their perceptions in regard to the communication practices at the school and the effects of those practices on overall student performance.

The intern interviewed all of the faculty members within the Middle School / High School program, both informally and formally. These interviews were conducted on a weekly basis. Approximately 25 staff members were consulted for the purpose of this study. During these interviews, several communication practices were discussed. Three common areas of concern which were addressed were the interpersonal communication practices of the teacher, the quality of the current school reporting procedures to effectively report student progress, and the school district’s use of technology in regard to communicating student progress.

The results of these interviews indicated that many of the school’s staff members were dissatisfied with the efforts of the school district to communicate the performance of their students. There were many issues brought up during the interviews, which demand immediate attention. Many staff members felt either poorly trained or unprepared to effectively communicate the progress of their students. They also related that the school’s current system of reporting student progress is antiquated and does not provide a clear picture of student progress. Some common concerns are that the report cards are too general in scope, do not contain pertinent information in reference to the student’s
therapy progress, and do not adequately report progress in the area of behavior modification. Many of the staff members are satisfied with the current use of technology at the school to report student progress and school activities, but also cited the need for a more modern approach to this type of communication policy. The use of school internet web sites, school newsletters, telecommunications, and other types of audio–visual programs need to be implemented.

The intern also conducted interviews with over 30 child study team representatives from the school districts across both Gloucester and Camden Counties. The nature of the questions posed to the school representatives was similar to those asked of the school’s teachers. These interviews occurred throughout the first marking period of the 1999–2000 school year and were generally informal in nature. The results of these interviews paralleled those of the school’s teachers. Parents felt that many teachers at the school do not clearly communicate their child’s academic and behavioral progress. Also parents expressed concern with the school’s current system of reporting behavioral incidents. Many related that the report cards do not adequately reflect the academic, behavioral, and therapeutic progress of the students given their unique and individual profiles. In addition, the report cards do not reflect student performance relative to the state core curriculum standards or individualized education plans. A majority of the school district representatives were satisfied with the district use of technology to communicate to themselves and their communities.

The intern also conducted over 40 interviews with the parents or guardians of the students at the Middle School / High School. These interviews were more formal than informal and occurred during conferences between the intern, the child’s teacher, the
parent, and the student. The goal of these conferences was to address specific academic and behavioral concerns. During the course of these meeting, the questions asked of the parents were of a similar theme as those asked the school district representatives and the teachers.

Parent responses concerning the effectiveness of the school’s communication practices varied. Many parents were dissatisfied with not only the infrequency of interactions that they have with their child, but they were also dissatisfied with the type of conversations they have had. Many felt the teachers were unprepared to address specific questions concerning their child and that the teachers were unprofessional at times. Their comments regarding the school’s report cards were similar to those of the teachers and school district representatives. In addition, they felt that the school did a poor job in explaining the report cards to them; that they were not kept informed of their child’s performance during the marking period, and that the teachers were ill equipped to recommend academic and behavioral interventions which could be utilized to address problems at school.

A total of over 100 interviews were conducted over the course of the first semester of the 1999 – 2000 school year concerning the communication practices of the Gloucester County Special Services School Districts Middle School / High School. Three areas of communication were covered during these interviews; the effectiveness of the school’s interpersonal communication, the quality of the school’s system of reporting student progress, and the school’s use of modern technology adequately to report student progress and school activities. Several generalizations can be surmised as a result of these interviews. These generalizations include:
1. That the teaching staff within the Middle School / High School program within the Gloucester County Special Services School District requires additional training in the area of interpersonal communication practices.

2. The administration within the school district needs to develop policies which will ensure that the communication process between teachers, parents, and school district representatives will aid in fostering greater success of the students within the program.

3. The current system of reporting student progress through report cards needs to be revised to ensure that the academic, behavioral, and therapeutic goals of each student are effectively reported.

4. The grading system of the faculty needs to be communicated to the parents and school district representatives more effectively to ensure that everyone involved with students of the school understand the areas of weakness and strengths of the child.

5. Each child's report card should reflect his / her progress relative to the New Jersey Core Curriculum Standards and the goals outlined within the student’s individualized education plan.

6. While most of the interviewees were satisfied with the use of technology within the school, it was evident to everyone interviewed that upgrading the technological capacities of the school is essential.

The intern conducted an extensive review of the literature concerning the communication efforts of both regular and special educators. A review of this literature is contained within chapter II of this report. Several studies were cited which reported that
when the communication policies and practices of a school district effectively communicate a student’s progress to all parties involved with the student, the likelihood of greater success of the student is greater.

There were many articles relating to the importance of interpersonal communication practices. These included such topics as effective listening techniques, how to talk to angry parents, how to conduct an effective parent – teacher – student conference, the use of class meetings to discuss school issues within the classroom, and the use of journals to facilitate the daily parent / school communication process. All of the articles were designed with one common goal in mind, to ensure greater success for the student.

The use of technology to communicate student progress was also well documented within the educational literature. The use of video, telecommunications, and computer networking were all outlined. In addition, there were several articles which referred to the use of internet web pages for parents to access to obtain information regarding homework, school activities, and the ability to e-mail teachers for the purpose of communicating to school personnel. It was reported that the school web page and internet accessibility has been well received within the educational community.

J.Cattermole and N. Robinson conducted one study of note in 1985. They asked parents to rank 20 methods they commonly use to communicate with schools, the authors found that two methods greatly outranked the others: approach by phone or in person, and parent / teacher conferences. They concluded that parents prefer interactions with school that are direct and personal. Within the same study it was stressed that parents want to be involved in school related matters, but often feel uninformed.
Ann Dayle, coordinator for Project Destiny at Keene State University, conducted another study of note. This study was designed to gather an understanding of the perceptions of the importance of effective communication practices and their effect on student performance. The study consisted of two cluster groups, one special education from an affluent area of New Hampshire, the other from a more rural area of the state in 1995.

The results of this study identified three main themes concerning the communication process: (a) teachers and parents prefer face-to-face communication, (b) both find it nearly impossible to schedule meetings, and (c) teachers and parents rarely discuss personal or emotional issues. The study also outlined several strategies to overcome the communication barriers. These strategies are included in the Project Destiny program and have been extremely successful in improving the parent-teacher communication process. In order to build positive communication patterns they suggest that teachers and parents meet early in the school year, that progress is updated frequently, meetings are scheduled in advance, that teacher’s listen to parent’s knowledge, that meetings are facilitated by a third party, and that teachers use non-judgmental language in the communication with parents and students.

While there is wealth of information available to educators in reference to communication, it is important to note that all of the material has had the same goal as its backbone. That goal it to ensure that each individual student is afforded the greatest opportunity to be as successful as possible within the school setting. The were many valuable strategies, programs, and policies that were contained within this review that
must be considered when attempting to address the concerns previously outlined in this text.

Research data was collected via a community survey which was designed to gather data about the perceptions of the effectiveness of the communication practices of the Gloucester County Special Services School District's Middle School / High School. This survey was distributed to the parents, teachers, and school district representatives of the students enrolled at the Middle School / High School. Approximately 100 surveys were distributed and over 85% were returned to the intern.

This survey is of a cross-sectional design in which the data was collected at one time representing two populations, school officials, and parents. These parallel samples were gathered to study the attitude and perceptions of the communication practices and policies of the school. Contained within the surveys were questions regarding the interpersonal communication practices of the school, the use of technology at the school in reference to communication, and the quality of the current system of progress reporting at the school. The surveys were scored using the 5-point Likert scale of measurement.

This survey consisted of 25 questions covering the three topics outlined in the previous paragraph. Many of the respondents of the survey answered all of the questions presented to them. There were several neutral responses to some statements. This is attributed to the nature of the statement.

The survey consisted of 10 statements, which related to the perceptions of the effectiveness of the interpersonal communication practices at the Gloucester County Special Services School District. Three areas of interpersonal communication were
addressed. Statements referring to school conferences and the interpersonal communication of the school officials were listed.

Parents responding to these questions reported that they were satisfied with the interpersonal communication practices of the school in reference to school conferences. Over 75% of the respondents reported that they agreed with the interpersonal communication practices of the school. The results from the students child study team representatives and school faculty were even greater than the parent, with 90% of those surveyed reporting that they either strongly agreed or agreed with the statements presented to them.

Statements relating to the daily and weekly face to face communication practices of the school were listed. Questions centered on the professionalism of the school’s faculty, as well as their knowledge of behavioral interventions. Parents responding to these statements overwhelmingly reported that they were often misinformed or uninformed of their child’s performance at school. Over 90% responded that they disagreed with the statements. The child student team representatives and school district personnel reported that they agreed with the statements presented to them.

There were 5 questions relating to the school’s effectiveness to use technology to communicate school activities and daily communication with parents and school districts. Telephone systems, computer programming, and the use of technology as a public relations asset were all listed.

All of the respondents to these questions reported that they were either neutral or agreed with the statements presented to them. There was however some differences in the responses of the school district representatives and the school’s faculty when compared to
those of the parents. Using the Likert scale of measurement there was a 25% difference in the responses, with parents being more satisfied when compared to the school’s faculty or child study team representatives.

The survey also contained 10 statements referring to the written reports used at the school to report student performance. Report cards, standardized test scores, behavioral incident report forms, and other school documents were listed within the statements.

The responses to these statements parallel those of the statements listed in the technology portion of the survey. Over 90% of the respondents reported that they were in disagreement or strongly disagreed with the school’s current systems. They all overwhelmingly disagreed with the statements referring to the school’s report cards. Not one group responded with answers of neutral or better. Scores relating to the school’s internal documents (incident referrals and point sheets) were slightly higher when compared to the other statements. The parents surveyed scored lowest of all respondents in this section of the survey.

The overall results of this communication survey show that those interviewed generally agreed when reporting on the overall communication practices of the Gloucester County Special Services School District Middle School / High School. School officials, parents and child study team representatives all reported a general dissatisfaction for the effectiveness of the technology program and reporting systems to report student progress. In contrast to the data collected about the interpersonal communication practices of the school, all of the parties surveyed were generally
satisfied with the efforts of the school, with the overall raw score of these items being highest.
Chapter 5

Conclusions, Implications and Further Study

Special education students who attend schools which employ effective communication practices to communicate their overall performance are generally more successful. Studies have shown that when the impersonal communication process which occurs between school officials and the overall school community effective, the overall behavior and academic growth of the students at the school is greater. Research has also indicated that when school districts report student progress sufficiently their students tend to be more successful. This study was designed to not only reveal the effective practices of communicating special education student progress, but also to assist in the development of communication policies and practices for special educators.

A review of the literature about communicating special education student progress revealed the need for school officials to develop appropriate policies and practices to communicate student performance. Additionally, when the use of modern technology, data reporting, and the interpersonal communication practices of a school district are effective; students are much more successful.

Approximately 150 special education teachers, parents, and child study team representatives were interviewed and surveyed for this project. They were questioned concerning their perceptions of the effectiveness of the communication practices and policies of the Gloucester County Special Services School District's Middle School/High
School. The results of the study indicated that there was a need for greater in-service training of the staff in the area of interpersonal communication practices, that there was a need to revise the school’s system of data reporting, and that modern technology was not being used effectively within the school.

Case studies of the effectiveness of the current communication practices of the school to improve student behavior were very vague and inconclusive. The data collecting and recording of student progress at the school has been poor. Many records of the behavioral and academic progress of the students were not available. The validity and reliability of the records, which were available, was poor. These records were generally unreliable when being considered for use within this study. They do however, indicate a need to revise and upgrade the data collection, recording, and reporting practices of the school.

Communicating the performance of special education students to their parents and child study team representatives is essential to the overall success of each student. The research conducted within this study indicated that when the interpersonal communication practices of the school faculty were effective; the students were more successful. When the school reports student progress efficiently, the students achieve at a higher level.

The general perception of the participants in this study was that the Gloucester County Special Services Middle School/High School’s communication practices do not contribute significantly to student success. The participants also felt that there is a need to improve the current system of reporting student performance and also a need to use modern technology as an aid in tracking, recording and reporting student behavior.
The results of this study led to several conclusions. (1) The current interpersonal communication practices at the school are ineffective. (2) The school does not provide an adequate system of reporting student performance to parents and child study team representatives. (3) The school does not use modern technology effectively when communicating their student’s progress.

Implications of the data collected within this study should result in policy changes, such as providing for in-service training and monitoring of the staff in the area of interpersonal communication and verbal management techniques. A complete revision of the school’s system of reporting is needed, and upgrades to the technological programs of the school are a necessity.

The need to provide in-service programs to the faculty of the Gloucester County Special Services employees is essential if the students within the district are to be successful. Minimally, the staff should receive training in how to effectively communicate when involved in conferences with parents or other professionals. The training should prepare school staff for both telephone and “face to face” communication exchanges with parents. The school employees should receive training in the interpersonal exchanges, which occur between themselves and their students daily. How to talk to a special education student is at times a very difficult task.

The need to revise the school’s system of reporting student performance was evident in the results of the data collected within this report. Changes to the school’s daily point sheet, report cards, incident referral forms, and therapy progress reports should all be considered. Data collection at the school is currently non-existent. Policy
changes which address the behavioral and academic reporting, and tracking of students must be developed.

Student progress reporting via the report card is very inadequate when outlining each student’s current level of performance and growth when compared to their actual abilities. The current report card makes no mention of a student’s progress on specific behavioral and / or therapeutic goals. These two areas of growth are part of each student’s I.E.P. and should be included within each progress report. These areas are essential in developing effective treatment plans for the special education student.

The use of technology within the Gloucester County Special Services to communicate school information could greatly contribute to the success of the students at the school and the success of the school itself. The research was clear in that a majority of the people surveyed felt that the school district needed to improve in this area. Research indicated that when schools effectively use all of their technological resources to communicate student progress and school events, the students are more successful and the overall community is more satisfied with school programs.

The upgrading of the technology systems of a school can be a very costly venture. Careful planning and consideration must be taken in the development of these programs. Everything from computers and telephones to internet and website development should be considered. Fortunately the Gloucester County Special Services School district is developing a “state of the art” educational facility and will be able to develop a technological program which will enable them to communicate effectively to their students as well as the overall school community.
Research conducted within this project indicated a need for the Gloucester County Special Services School to improve the communication practices of their environment. Studies indicated that when schools communicate their students' progress and other school information effectively to the overall school community, the students are more successful. Three major areas of communication must be addressed at the school district. The in-service training of staff in the area of interpersonal communication practices, revisions to the progress reporting system at the school, and the upgrading and use of modern technology to communicate school information. If these issues are going to be effectively addressed, some organizational change must occur.

Staff development is an ongoing practice within all school districts. The development of in-service programs for faculty members is essential to assist in improving the interpersonal communication practices at the school. School administrators must not only be responsible for the development of the training for staff, but also for the monitoring and evaluation of the school's program. Professional improvement plans of all employees should reflect the need for continued training and monitoring in the area of communicating pupil progress efficiently.

Student progress reports, incident reports, and other indicators of student progress at the school must be revised. Changes within the school environment revolve around the development of new forms, training the staff to use the new documents, and explaining these forms to the students, parents, and child study team representatives. All school documents should be examined and revised if necessary. Everything from daily student point sheets to student report cards and I.E.P. forms should be considered.
In order to use modern technology to communicate school information, the school must have the physical capacity to provide the service. This is a very expensive undertaking and should not be taken lightly. The purchasing, training, and development of computer programs and telecommunications systems require careful planning and continual review. The organizational structure at the school will need to allow for the hiring of additional employees who can handle the development of the technology program. Also, the district will need to appropriate additional funds for purchase of equipment and maintenance of the program.

As special education schools continue to evolve and grow, it is important that they employ the most effective and efficient practices to ensure that each student is afforded the opportunity to be as successful as they can be. While this paper focused mainly on the communication practices of schools, it by no means the only answer to improving student performance. Other areas to consider are curriculum, behavior management programs, therapy, and substance abuse counseling for students when looking for ways to help special education students be more successful.

Staff development is an intricate part of each school district's philosophy. Providing in-service programs can be very effective in helping staff members grow professionally, unfortunately many programs are poorly run and not well structured. The need to develop effective training for school officials in the area of communication practices should only one portion of the overall training program at each school.

There were many recommendations for change to the communication practices and policies at the Gloucester County Special Services School District. More specifically, at the Middle School/High School. There will always be a need to improve
the services of both the special education and non-disabled students. By effectively communicating the performance and progress of their students to their parents and child study team members, the overall success of that student’s will be greater.

By making revisions to the current communication practices of the Gloucester County Special Services School District and through the tracking of the effect that those practices have made on improving student performance, several positive outcomes should occur. Additionally, the overall student body will be more successful and the staff within the district will continue to grow professionally. Also, through the continued research and tracking of student academic and behavioral performance, the reinforcement of the findings of previous studies about this topic can occur.


Appendix A

Research Instrument
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